

**Statement for the Record
Cohen Veterans Network**

**House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Overcoming PTSD: Assessing VA's Efforts to Promote Wellness and Healing**

***Wednesday, June 7, 2017
10:00 a.m.***

Thank you for this opportunity to submit a statement for the record in connection with the hearing titled *Overcoming PTSD: Assessing VA's Efforts to Promote Wellness and Healing*. As the CEO and President of Cohen Veterans Network (CVN), and in my 30 years of military behavioral health experience, I've seen that community-based treatment programs and embedded providers near the military member units are ideal options for serving war fighters or veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental health conditions.

PTSD Background

PTSD is a clinically diagnosed psychiatric disorder that can occur following the experience or the witnessing of life-threatening events, including military combat, and is the most commonly occurring disorder that occurs after exposure to traumatic events. Symptoms of PTSD can include reliving the event or having flashbacks; avoiding situations that trigger the memories; losing interest in activities or feelings of fear, guilt, or shame; feeling anxious or always on alert for danger. Sufferers may have trouble concentrating or sleeping—a state called hyper-arousal. Other symptoms include panic attacks, depression, suicidal thoughts, feeling estranged and isolated, and not being able to complete daily tasks.

Among the military, nearly 20 percent of enlisted soldiers—approximately 300,000—who returned from Iraq and Afghanistan have reported symptoms of PTSD or major depression. Other factors in combat can add to stress and contribute to PTSD and other mental health problems, including the veteran's role in the war, politics surrounding the war, where it was fought, and the type of enemy the service members faced.

CVN Efforts

CVN is establishing accessible community-based mental health clinics across the country that align with the efforts of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) around mental health care. We are currently demonstrating that community access and engagement with the veteran population near where they work and live can reach those in need of services and get ahead of the crisis. Of the estimated 20 veteran suicides a day, 14 never make it to the VA. We believe that community providers like our Steven A. Cohen Military Family Clinics provide a desirable alternative option for veterans and their families.

As a result, CVN was established in 2015. The mission of CVN is to improve the quality of life for post-9/11 veterans and their families by focusing on improving mental health outcomes, especially those associated with PTSD and related challenges. The primary way that CVN does this is through the direct provision of mental health care. Direct care is provided through a national network of Cohen Military Family Clinics (MFCs) for veterans and family members dealing with post-traumatic stress and other mental health conditions.

The Cohen MFCs provide a compassionate, individually-tailored, and holistic approach to outpatient mental health treatment for veterans and their family members. CVN defines a veteran as any individual who has served in the Armed Services (including the National Guard and Reserves) in any capacity, regardless of role or discharge status. Our clinics specialize in time-limited, evidence-based care. Grounded in the culture of veterans and military families, our clinics build trusting, confidential relationships with patients and maintain strong ethical and legal commitments to privacy and confidentiality.

The core areas of adult treatment for all MFCs are post-traumatic stress, depression, anxiety, sleep problems, substance abuse, bereavement, transition and reintegration issues, and family/couple discord. MFCs are also equipped to assess for (and, in some clinic locations, treat) mild traumatic brain injury. For children, MFCs provide diagnostic assessment and treatment for common childhood disorders such as depression, anxiety, family stress, and adjustment issues. Individual MFCs also provide specialized treatment in other areas beyond the identified core. CVN strongly advocates the use of evidence-based and evidence-informed treatments.

It is well-known that, despite the sacrifices veterans and their families have made in service to the nation, the mental health services provided to them by the Veterans Health Administration and civilian providers are often inaccessible or inadequate to meet the critical mental health needs that have emerged in recent years. Moreover, there are many veterans and family members who don't qualify for VA care, and the VA Choice program has been unsuccessful in fully addressing the issues with access and quality.

Our CVN clinics report that 20% of veteran clients are diagnosed with PTSD and they also face challenges like depression, substance abuse, and other transition issues. Community providers like our clinics also see a large percentage of female veterans and other than honorable discharged veterans, all with low wait times.

We believe in a true holistic, evidence-based approach as the best option to care for veterans, featuring a team of clinicians, case managers, and peer veteran outreach staff. These roles play an integral part in the 12 clinics we will have in operation by the end of 2017.

As this Committee examines whether the VA's current system of health care services and benefits effectively promotes wellness and supports veterans with PTSD in seeking treatment, as well as the importance of peer support and community-based treatment programs for veterans with PTSD, it is important to recognize that community providers such as CVN are well-positioned to support the VA's goal of expanding care options for mental health, while serving veterans in the most effective, timely manner.

As you move forward with PTSD-specific initiatives—as well as your overall efforts to extend and enhance the Veterans Choice Program—we look forward to serving as a resource and true partner in these important efforts. Do not hesitate to contact me directly if we can provide you with additional information or answer any questions. Thank you.

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